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GROWING PAINS



GROWING PAINS

JEAN STARR UNTERMAYER



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UNIV. OF
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TO LOUIS:



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GROWING PAINS

*From the bloodless battle,
From wrestling with memories—those athletic
ghosts,
From an aching reach for Beauty,
Speech has burst forth.
Not for Art's sake,
But to rid me of an ancient sorrow,—
Not mine alone and yet so wholly mine.*

*I have left no songs for an idle lute,
No pretty tunes of coddled ills,
But the bare chart of my growing pains.*

CLAY HILLS

It is easy to mould the yielding clay.
And many shapes grow into beauty
Under the facile hand.
But forms of clay are lightly broken;
They will lie shattered and forgotten in a dingy
corner.

But underneath the slipping clay
Is rock . . .
I would rather work in stubborn rock
All the years of my life,
And make one strong thing
And set it in a high, clean place,
To recall the granite strength of my desire.

HIGH-TIDE

I EDGED back against the night.
The sea growled assault on the wave-bitten shore.
And the breakers,
Like young and impatient hounds,
Sprang, with rough joy on the shrinking sand.
Sprang—but were drawn back slowly,
With a long, relentless pull,
Whimpering, into the dark.

Then I saw who held them captive;
And I saw how they were bound
With a broad and quivering leash of light,
Held by the moon,
As, calm and unsmiling,
She walked the deep fields of the sky.

BIRTH

SOMETIMES in the hollow dark,
Sometimes in the crowded day,
Comes the memory of your room.
The air, warm and faintly aromatic—
The starched rustle of the nurse's gown—
The hushed air, the busy whispers—
The wide bed, tightly folded in—
And your young body, gracious even in pain.
Your head, turned sideways on the pillow,
Was flushed and stern;
The cords of your neck swelling
Up under the edge of your soft, brown hair.
In that strained quiet
You seemed caught up in some vast, harmonious
rhythm,
Your limbs consenting dumbly to an unheard mark-
ing of time;

Attaining in your labor a grandeur of beauty
That shamed your usual saucy prettiness.
I longed then, I remember, for the heroic marble
That would hold this triumph immortal.
You held hard to my hand.
Only your restless fingers were eloquent with pain.
And I marvelled at your composure
And dignity,
You—the petulant, spoiled child!
Your lips moved soundlessly;
Little drops of moisture beaded your forehead.
And I remembered seeing it so on early summer
 mornings
When we, two sisters, slept together.

At last your cry!
So sharp and smiting,
And echoing like a call from a far place.
Then, after a tense moment,
Trembling on the turbulent warmth,
Came the tentative whine of your child.
Your hands loosened and I left the room,
Somehow stumbling past the anxious faces,

Avoiding the banal, questioning mouths,
To where the air was cool
And where I could recover
From this miracle. . . .
For I had seen the naked mystery of birth unfold
itself;
Tortuous, heavy and slow.
And I had watched, alert and curious,
To learn the meaning. . . .
And here I was more dazed and baffled than before.

Compelling my mind, stabbing my soul to courage,
Sometimes in the hollow dark,
Sometimes in the crowded day,
Comes the memory of your room.
And once again I feel
The terror and the triumph of that loneliness
That wraps us round,
Each in his greatest hour,
With exultation and with fertile pain.

THE SUMMONS

WHAT urged me through sleep to the narrow
window?

Toward the east marches the packed army of the
snow,

Crowding the street from side to side

Driving ahead with chilling haste,

Going to some white splendor,

Leaving behind a white desolation.

The window panes rattle,

Like drum-beats that echo, off-key;

Calling. . . .

The snow rushes on with a mad purpose,

Gathering recruits as it goes.

Always the drum-taps summon . . .

What do they ask for?
Whom are they calling?

I go trembling back to bed,
Stiffened with a cold courage,
And throw warm and defensive arms
Over the body of the man I love,
As he twitches and starts in a restless sleep.

*works embody an essentially
feminine or womanly attitude
toward life. The poem is a re-
production of her early environment*

A

AUTUMN

(FOR MY MOTHER)

How memory cuts away the years,
And how clean the picture comes
Of autumn days, brisk and busy;
Charged with keen sunshine.
And you, stirred with activity;
The spirit of these energetic days.

There was our back-yard,
So plain and stripped of green,
With even the weeds carefully pulled away
From the crooked, red bricks that made the walk.
And the earth on either side so black.

Autumn and dead leaves burning in the sharp air.
'And winter comforts coming in like a pageant.

I shall not forget them:

Great jars laden with the raw green of pickles,
Standing in a solemn row across the back of the porch,
Exhaling the pungent dill;

And in the very center of the yard,

You, tending the great catsup kettle of gleaming
copper

Where fat, red tomatoes bobbed up and down

Like jolly monks in a drunken dance.

And there were bland banks of cabbages that came
by the wagon-load,

Soon to be cut into delicate ribbons

Only to be crushed by the heavy, wooden stompers.

Such feathery whiteness—to come to kraut!

And after, there were grapes that hid their brightness
under a grey dust,

Then gushed thrilling, purple blood over the fire;

And enamelled crab-apples that tricked with their
fragrance

But were bitter to taste.

And there were spicy plums and ill-shaped quinces,

And long string beans floating in pans of clear water

Like slim, green fishes.

And there was fish itself,
Salted, silver herring from the city . . .

And you moved among these mysteries,
Absorbed and smiling and sure;
Stirring, tasting, measuring,
With the precision of a ritual.
I like to think of you in your years of power—
You, now so shaken and so powerless—
High priestess of your home.

POSSESSION

WALK into the world,
Go into the places of trade;
Go into the smiling country—
But go, clad, wrapped closely always,
Shielded and sustained
In the visible flame of my love.

Let it blaze about you—
A glowing armor for all to see;
Flashing around your head—
A tender and valiant halo.

I think there will be many to wonder
And many to stand in awe and envy.
But surely no one will come too close to you;
No one will dare to claim you—
Hand or heart—
As you pass in your shining and terrible garment.



CLOTHES

SINCE the earliest days I have dressed myself
In fanciful clothes;
Trying to satisfy a whispering insistence.
There was so much I dared not give
To speech or act;
So I put romance and fantasy
Into my raiment.
In that dreamy girlhood
My clothes were like my thoughts;
Vague and sentimental.
They were of misty greens
And faded lavenders;
Like cloudy colors in entangled woods,
Like the budding thoughts of a young girl.

Later on when womanhood came,
[And Motherhood sat consciously on me,

I essayed the dignified and noble
In a trailing gown of gray.

But Spring came,
And with it a dress of juicy green
And tricky yellows,
With darts of black,
Like bare twigs showing through bright leaves.
After a while I revelled in the sophistication
Of a gown of black;
Cut low, swirling in worldly curves.
And once I dared the long line of the siren
In a gown of weird brocade.

But these things have not silenced the whispers.
Something urgent wants a tongue.
My clothes are not me, myself;
Something real escapes in the translation of color
and fabric.

I think I should go naked into the streets,
And wander unclothed into people's parlors.
The incredulous eyes of the bewildered world

Might give me back my true image. . . .
Maybe in the glances of others
I would find out what I really am.

THE POTTERIES

WHEN the blue clay glints through the rusty hillsides,
It is not to the eye of Man it beckons,
Nor to his itching fingers;
But to his world-old instinct of obedience
That bids him carry on the trade and tradition of
 his Father,
Who wrought beauty
From the willing earth.

ZANESVILLE

I WILL not be like the unaspiring hills,
Whence the sour clay is taken,
To be moulded by the shape-loving fingers of Man
Into vases and cups of an old pattern.

But I will be my own creator,
Dragging myself from the clinging mud,
And mould myself into fresh and lovelier shapes
To celebrate my passion for Beauty.

A MAN

(TO MY FATHER)

OFTEN, when I would sit, a dreamy, straight-
haired child,
A book held gaping on my knee,
Watering a sterile romance with my thoughts,
You would come bounding to the curb
And startle me to life.
You sat so straight upon your vibrant horse—
That lovely horse, all silken fire and angry grace—
And yet you seemed so merged in him,
So like! At least my thoughts
Gave you a measure of that wildness.
And oh, for many years you seemed to me
Something to marvel at and yet to fear.

But now I know that you resemble most
That growth in nature that you most revere.

You are so like, so very like, a tree—
Grown straight and strong and beautiful,
With many leaves.
The years but add in richness to your boughs,
You make a noble pattern on the sky.
About your rugged trunk
Vines creep and lichens cling,
And children play at tag.
Upon your branches some will hang their load
And rest and cool while you must brave the sun.
But you put forth new life with every year,
And tower nearer to the clouds
And never bend or grow awry.

I wonder what sweet water bathes your roots,
And if you gain your substance from the earth;
Or if you have a treaty with the sun,
Or keep some ancient promise with the heavens.

RESIGNATION

Now hear me:

I will cast aside my longing for romantic rôles
And accept my destiny with a wry pride.

I will be a consoling breast;
Lips of comfort and counsel;

A retreat from storms and temptations;
And the officer-in-chief of the domestic garrison.

I, who was wont to think of myself
As an arch rebel,

The very symbol of Romance,
Or a singing flame that lit up the corners of our
world. . . .

But I will take a sly comfort in my lot,
And my share of glory, too,
In the praises of your songs,
And the wages of your love!

PILGRIMAGE

OH, rude hills,
Why do you turn your purple backs on me
When I seek you in the evening
With praise and questioning in my heart?

Are you too rapt in conversation with the clouds;
Or too aloof in kingly unconcern?
Or have you turned, perhaps, in very pity,
Knowing I would be stricken
By the shattering brightness of your gaze?

ON THE BEACH

THERE was motion in the night—
Motion of sea, of breeze, of cloud—
But we lay motionless upon the sand,
With far-reaching thoughts
And little speech.
We watched awhile the changing shapes of clouds—
Now like a flock of birds,
Now like a lonely tree . . .
We were strangely stirred,
For it was summer, but restive spring was in the air.

After a while we talked of love—
Of the heedless stabs, the healing wounds of love—
Of a distant friend.
And then, as the sea grew louder,
Of the war.

Our thoughts grew turbulent;
Our words clashed like weapons . . .
Louder and nearer the sea boomed up.
A red, smoking moon burst through a cloud;
Our words darted out with a sharper sound
Until, like spent waves
That ran out and were lost in the sea,
They sank lower and ceased,
And were lost in the dark.

There was quiet in the night—
Quiet of star-hung skies, of stretching sands;
Quiet of space.
And the moon, grown pale, floated lightly off,
Like a child's soap-bubble, fragile and clear.
Our hands sought each other's.
The night had its way . . .
We turned with peace in our hearts
From the clamor of seas and of wars
To the greater clamor of love.

CAGED

I COULD almost see the heat curl
In grinning, evil curves,
Up through the narrow court.
And I flapped, on naked, slippered feet
Across the bare floor;
And sipped at something cool and drooped ki-
monoed arms
With sick languor.

And then I saw you at your window—
You, with your damp grey face,
In your itching servant's black,
Your swollen fingers heavy on the sill.
You gazed dully at the caged canary
Songless on his sticky perch.

SONYA

WHAT made your little, wizened face so kind,
And made me happy just to look at you;
And see your small and crooked-seeming body
Bend over household tasks or sewing
In that skilled way you had.
And what made the long-rebelling thought
Assail me, when your high, shrill voice
Pierced me in distant rooms and I could hear you
Pouring love-words on my only child.

I knew your human need, your tender heart.
And took your lavish service and your love
With almost shame.

And you have gone,
Passed with fierce loyalty to another home,
And squander mother-love on strangers' children
For twenty-seven dollars every month.

CHURCH SOCIABLE

"ISN'T it quaint," he turned and said to me,
"To watch these village people at the fair?"
But I had seen too often what was there;
I shrugged impatience at his sympathy . . .
I was a child again, and Mrs. Lee
And other members of The Ladies' Aid
At tables on the lawn, a meek parade,
Were serving cakes and glasses of iced-tea.

I hated this weak pomp of charity,
This pauper feast to aid the stricken poor.
I watched these too-thin ladies seek their door
In sweetly pious insincerity;
Holding themselves so righteously alone,
Turning their Christian backs on Mrs. Cohn.

REBUKE

I GATHERED what insolent gardens grew,
Roses of every kind and hue.
I took two armfuls, I cut them down
And brought them grudgingly to the town.
I hated the country that shut me in,
With strange calm folk from my restless kin.
I even loved the gritty train
That carried me to the city again.
And once in the El I looked to see
Familiar sights withheld from me:
Hurrying houses, row on row;
Colored crowds in the street below;
A city park edged boldly between;
(I silently hailed its dusty green.)
Hair-shops, department stores, rooms askew,
In a moving flash past the window flew.
How heavy my drooping roses grew.

Rounding a turn the cars slackened and creaked
In front of a loft where the sunlight streaked
A mocking finger across the dust
That lay on the windows, a mouldy crust.
I craned to pierce that sweaty gloom,
To know how they fared in that reeking room.
I could hardly see what those huddled girls
Were doing with wires and paper twirls . . .
And then, in the grimy morning hours
I saw—they were making paper flowers.

THE BED

I LOVE that hour best of all the hours,
When freed from our friends and the clutches of day,
The last awake in the quiet house,
We lie carelessly clasped in friendly content
And lapse into drowsy philosophies.
Here on our bed—
More than moon-swept beach
Or beckoning, romantic wood,
More than the family board,
Our common meeting ground—
Here ecstasy has caught us up together,
Man and woman, as if in some huge hand,
Torn up out of the world;
Joyously yielding to a mighty urge,
Burning and unaware.
And pain has fettered us here,

Bitter, corrosive pain,
When soul grapples with soul and the white scar
 remains;
And pain that is mild,
Healing pain that comes with gentle tears.

The window curtain beckons as if flung by an in-
 visible hand.

Is it Isolde's scarf? . . .
Old memories half-awake us
Who are half-asleep:
A strain of music we have learned together;
A mystic night beside a midnight sea;
The smile of filtered sunshine when our boy
Laughed hope back to our hopeless hearts.

We sigh, clasp hands in weary thanks—
And the bed draws us together;
Innocent children in a mother's arms,
Shriven upon the breast of sleep.

MOON-RISE

WE walked contentedly along,
So at home in the night,
That when I saw a cozy, yellow moon
Reflected in a warm and shallow pool,
It seemed the comfortable lamp on my table
Mirrored in my cup of tea.

RAIN

I HAVE always hated the rain,
And the gloom of grayed skies.
But now I think I must always cherish
Rain-hung leaf and the misty river;
And the friendly screen of dripping green
Where eager kisses were shyly given
And your pipe-smoke made clouds in our damp, close
 heaven.

The curious laggard passed us by,
His wet shoes souged on the shining walk.
And that afternoon was filled with a blurred glory—
That afternoon, when we first talked as lovers.

“DISCOVER ME AGAIN”

DISCOVER me again—

Look at me with new eyes, oh my belovéd.
See, my aspect changes to the need of love,
Even as the stable earth answers the call of the
seasons.

Do not regard me only as a winter-wife,
A pedlar of homely comforts.
Indeed I am also your girl of Spring.
Dreams possess and inhabit me.
But these lie sick and languid;
They quicken to the call of life,
Only at the recognition of your glance,
At the hail of your love.

Discover me again!

TOLERANCE AND TRUTH

SOMETIMES, when I hear people mouth the word
"toleration,"

I am moved by a fury and a kind of pity too.

Because I know they have run too long with Com-
promise,

That girl of easy virtue,

Who yields to all with a slack smile,

And weakens her paramours by their quick and musty
victories.

How different they who seek Truth,

She, whose radiant virtue is a beacon in strange
places.

No man can wholly possess her;

But they become strong who follow her searching
footsteps;

Strengthened by that slow and rigorous pursuit—

And the hope of her shining surrender.



A TEACHER

(FOR H. E.)

It was late afternoon.
Wearily a yellow streak of sunlight
Fell through the blue net curtains,
Making greenish shadows on your face
And over your heavy shoulders.
I watched you strain to sit straight
On the stiff chair by the piano's side,
While a heedless and hurrying girl
Stumbled over her scales,
And giggled out her excuses
With the gauche coquetry of fourteen.

I thought of your reaching aims,
And of how you were always giving
From your heart and brain;

Giving from the toil of years—
Giving yourself;
Of the many you urged to harder striving;
Of those who were eased and lifted;
And of those—like this thin-souled child—
For whom sacrifice was empty.

And when a patient smile lit up your face,
Warming your eyes, but deepening the ruts of care,
I was reminded of lamplight in a well-loved room—
Lamplight that cheered, but whose drooping beams
Revealed the shabbiness of nearby-chairs
And deepened the shadows.

MEDICINE

THEY lay small healing to my mind,
They who come with luke-warm poultices of praise,
And smile a festered, green smile
And call me clever;
Or those that come with crippling kindness,
Lauding my domestic wisdom.

These are not the things I strive for.
My mind would rise from its rumpled couch.
It has little toleration
With the bed-side manner of friends.
I know a potion for my pain:
Life will brew me a tonic
Of work—
Work that will make me whole again,
When I can labor with laughter.

SPRING

PAIN hung on me like a thick, wet robe
And dragged me down,
And sickened me with cold and numbness
When I longed for the poignant health of spring.

poignant

Then fever came,
Fever that drove me from room to room,
And turned me restlessly from books to music,
Away from music to the open window,
But always back again to cankering doubt.
Till I could no longer fail to understand
Your wistful and unwilling step,
That seemed to cross our threshold, looking back;
Nor evade the wounds of your empty caresses,
Rituals without faith.
Your sudden kindnesses and sudden angers
Crumpled the hope in my heart,

And were confessions reflecting my fear:
"Who was she? What was her bearing?
Was she unlike me? Was she golden, tall?"
Half adoration filled me for her unknown graces,
A trembling exaltation that is beauty's due.
And then rage,—mounting cruel, revengeful,—
Shook me with its fierce hunger,
Till my flayed soul fell
Gasping and scarred.
After imagined tortures.

And fear again—cold fear.

That night came—and I had sensed the moment,
And something in me dramatized my pain,
For I had dressed in black.
And you came in, blind to my trembling,
And shuffled, halting to my arms;
Blurting out your story, half-thrilled, half-shamed,
At once thankful for the safety of my sure love,
Yet clutching, childishly, the frayed ends of your
shoddy romance.
Till I had soothed you,

And rewarded your belated loyalty
With tenderness, until you slept.
And I fought hotly through the night,
With my cold pain.

The days of healing came
And you gathered renewed ecstasy with each hour,
And clothed me with your dreams again,
And shook off our tears with a careless gesture,
And walked about with the face of a child.

And I went lamely through twelve questioning
months,
And answered you with uncertain smiles,
And wept in secret hours
Till I could test our happiness with Spring.

Then Spring came
And you made the season my mirror;
Confidence came back,
And my wild love!

But when I grow most insolent with joy

A cold fear mocks me;
An old fear:
Spring.

GIFTS

I HAVE so little art.

Words leap from me with incoherent eagerness,
Or stumble out, stammering and vague;
Even my dumb tears gesture without eloquence.

I am so poor in gifts.

I have so few light-hearted hours,
So little fantasy to lead you on strange quests,
So little beauty to refresh your eye.

But I am great in this:

For you I hold infinities of love.

For you I am

The tender fortress of content,

The radiant harbor of desire.

HYMN

I WILL sing to the mounting hills;
I will send out my song to them,
And salute their green piety
With melody, golden and long.

There is strength in the steady hills;
They are rooted in purpose and peace.
They gaze at me so simply
And answer my questioning heart.

A SMALL BOY'S HALLOWE'EN

AH, Dick, a wonderful sight!
We almost touched the moon tonight.
When our brave little car
Raced up the frosty avenue.
And, Dick,—the scene
Was set for Hallowe'en!

The pumpkin moon was swollen tight,
And right at the top, a scar,
Like a silver knife-edge thrusting through.
And the witch-broom trees against the light,
On the far horizon's edge,
Were sweeping the sky till they broke the blue
In a ragged line of purple and black,
And golden leaves from Heaven's hedge
Peeped through the crack.

We watched the witches' broom-sticks sway
As the wind whistled past in a frightened way.
And we—we hurried back.

THE SUNDAY DRIVE

WE passed the slaughter-house and left the town.
And there it stretched in opulent width,
An endless piece of tawny silk, tacked down by trees,
Across the rich, indifferent fields.
Our horse would amble on, as on a common road,
Under luxurious maples, till we came
Opposite the red brick building, where the walks
Were finely laid at martial right-angles;
And where proper-planted flowers grew in rows,
Not haphazard, as in our neighbor's small back-yard.
We used to stop there almost every time
To look across the road and watch the house,
A stiff-backed house that sat too straight
And looked down at the road with tight-shut eyes.
There never was a sound of quarreling,
Of labor, or of children playing games—

One scarcely ever saw a man about.
Nothing came down the road but quiet,
A cold, unnatural silence that froze our speech.
We somehow felt it was a wealthy house,
And the road, we knew the road,
The finest drive in all Muskingum County.
We always wondered and I wonder yet,
Why those who named it should have called that
stretch,—
So wide, so beautiful, so rich—
“The Poor House Road.”

LATE AFTERNOON: A MAN MEDITATES

I WAS at one with the dull middle-age of the year,
Sitting alone on my front porch,
That porch, so comfortless and drab.
Inside my wife rattled the supper dishes,
And without, in the smoky, pink twilight,
The woodbine on the wall showed a rusty purple.
The yellow leaves dripped down with tired gestures;
But one young tree was thoughtlessly green.

The holiday throng dawdled home;
Scraps of talk rang out and were lost again in the
 broken rhythm of straggling feet;
The crowded cars creaked slowly past.
From one a girl looked back—
'A dark girl's ardent face, capped in bright green,
Looked at me,
Laughing . . .
Thoughtlessly calling my youth.

MIRAGE

As the great ship sped through the evening,
And the fire-ball of the sun swung in the arch of the
 skies,
A vision of you rose out of the foam, your vibrant
 hair blowing up into the sun.
You danced over the shining waters in great, exultant
 bounds,
With all the zest of conquering youth in your up-
 flung gestures.
You shouted loving and mirthful commands.
And it seemed that I must leap from the prow,
And rush to you over the radiant sea!

ALONE

OUT in the night alone—
The silent trees, which are no enemies of mine,
But neither friends;
And a moon, which heavily goes
Behind pendulous, smoky clouds.
Out in the night—
And not even a wind blowing
To send fear into my heart.
My thoughts do that;
My thoughts that go to an old song:
“Father and mother are long since dead
And no one knows me.”

No one knows me tonight.
I walk heavily along the road
And though I can see the lights of my home,

I am alone.

You have shut me out with a thought

And I am friendless.

I have kinship with no living thing;

Nature does not hold out her hands to me,
Nor God.

*"Father and mother are long since dead
And no one knows me."*

DELIVERANCE

JUST think of me,
Come from the shadows of the womb
To the shadows of this world;
Seeing the sun only through a veil.
On both sides of me walk ghostly shapes;
One on either hand.

Often on a Spring afternoon,
Being misled by the bright glow beyond the hills,
I would run with all the strength and fleetness of my
youth
Up the long slope!
Hearing only my heart-beats and the rushing of the
wind,
I stood on the summit and hallooed at freedom.
I was glad, thinking I had outrun my gray com-
panions;

Glad for one moment.

But as the glow died in my cheeks and in my heart,
I heard again the evil footfalls, measured and slow.
And I knew they were still abreast of me . . .

Then on a glad May morning I thought I met the
Sun.

I had always wished to look him in the face; to see
him without his veil.

And, in that dazzling moment, I thought: "At last,
the Sun!"

Such a light and gladness was in that face,
Such a rush of living love.

It was not the Sun.

It was my lover.

I mated with him.

He made me such a bright palace of words that I
thought I could live in it.

I told him of the shadows and of the veil before the
face of the Sun;

But he said he had a Magic that would slay my grim
companions;

And that it was not the Sun that was veiled, but my
eyes;

And that he could tear those veils away . . .

So in the days that followed I lay in a bright dream.
At times I waked for an instant but then I felt the
dread presences always with me.

So back into the dream . . .

And from that dream, half ecstasy, half pain,
Came our child.

And I was glad.

"Now," I said, as I watched him grow like a flame,
"Here is a fire to burn away mist—

"And here is a golden sword to slay an army of
shadows!"

And I waited for the miracle.

But the flame danced like a wind-blown butterfly;
And the sword made only a happy clatter;
A game in a nursery . . .

And the black mist rose and wrapped itself over all
brightness—

It blotted out the sun,

[63]



And lay over the gay colors of flowers,
It hung on the lips of laughter like a sneer . . .
And the dark guests stayed on—
They put an evil sound into the gentle fall of snow;
They crept into the wind and made it a menace.
They pressed dully against me—even in the hour of
love . . .

Whence will come the cleansing flame—
Must it be the fire of my own heart?
And the sword of deliverance—
Must it be made with my own hands?



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